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CONDITIONS IN INDIA DURING THE PAST YEAR

By John P. Jones, D.D., Madura, India

During the last year India has made very substantial progress in several ways.

The unrest of the past three years has lost much of its bitterness and has become considerably reduced if not entirely removed. This is owing largely to the new reform movements introduced, nearly a year and a half ago, by the government into the legislative bodies. The increase of the Indian members in the provincial legislatures so as to create a majority of non-official members in those bodies, the substantial addition of Indian members to the vice-regal council, with other large advantages bestowed on the natives of this land—all these have given to the people a new sense of their importance and power beyond anything formerly experienced by them.

And it may be truly said that the Indian members of these bodies are not slow to avail themselves of their new opportunities and added increment of power. In the vice-regal council itself the Indian members have been bold to introduce new acts which are fundamental in their importance for the well-being of their country. For instance, the educational act, introduced by Mr. Gokhale is one of the most important laws ever introduced into the councils of this government. It provides for the gradual introduction of a free and compulsory primary education for India. And it is an interesting fact that the government looks with favor upon it, and that the official members of the council will probably vote for it. It should be said that Mr. Gokhale is one of the most able, as he is certainly the most eloquent, member of the viceroy's council. He presented his new act with consummate skill and ably marshalled a host of telling facts and figures in its favor. But what can be more

effective in revealing the need of such an act than the simple statement that 89 per cent of the 315,000,000 people of India are analphabet; and of the remaining 11 per cent not more than one-tenth are possessed of anything more than a primary education. Not more than six women in a thousand are in any sense literate!

Another distinguished member of the viceroy's council is the Honorable Mr. Bhupendranath Basu, who introduced, recently, a bill to amend the special marriage act of 1872. The object of the bill is to make certain the validity of marriages contracted between members of two different castes. It seems strange that India has no law which is applicable to the whole country and which will make valid a marriage contract between, for instance, any two members of different castes of the Hindu community. Hitherto the marriage laws for Hindus have been the caste customs legalised; and castes take cognizance only of marriages contracted by their own members. This new act, now before the legislature, has stirred the Hindu community to its depths. Conservatives recognise it as the most serious blow ever aimed at the caste system; and they oppose it, for that reason, with extreme vigor. On the other hand, men of progress and of advanced thought and interest, stand by Mr. Basu and are determined to bring this fundamental reform into the laws of the land. It therefore represents a serious conflict in the land; and I trust that the government will see to it that this act becomes a part of our code, and that this important social reform movement be carried through at all hazards. The value of this movement lies in the fact that it has been initiated and is conducted by the Hindus themselves whose new social consciousness is leading them to new opportunities and blessings in life. They are feeling, as never before, the utter inadequacy of the caste system to meet modern conditions and demands of life.

I am compelled to say that the social reform movement, as an organization has, during the last decade, suffered considerable eclipse through the intense political propaganda and unrest. Nearly all the men of culture have been willing to ignore the supreme need of social amelioration and advancement if only they could somehow reach even a

modified political independence. They sadly forget that no political independence is possible to a people whose social inequalities and disabilities are so many and so flagrant as they are in India at the present time.

Yet there is no need for discouragement. And it may be interesting to add here some of the notable changes which have recently taken place within Hinduism itself as recorded by the staunch Hindu social reformer and able editor of *The Indian Social Reformer*.

"The right way," he says, "of grasping social progress among Hindus is not so much to count the changes under different heads, as to see what the relative amount of opposition now offered is as compared with what it was, say, some fifteen or twenty years ago.

The opposition had been steadily growing less, and ceased altogether rather suddenly about six years back. Certain journals and publicists, well known for their hostility, completely turned round. This is a development we owe to the growth of the sentiment of nationality.

This, however, is a negative factor, though those who are in the thick of the struggle know that it is none the less important. It means that organized opposition to social reform has ceased, and that henceforth we have to contend chiefly against individual inertia.

On the positive side may be mentioned some changes which are the outcome of Western influences, among which the chief are education (directly) and Christianity (indirectly): (1) Higher standards of personal purity and dignity among men. (2) Integrity in public positions, and public spirit. (3) Higher valuation of female and child life.

Concubinage, which was esteemed as rather a manly fashion some twenty years ago, has largely disappeared among the more enlightened class; and even among the less enlightened it is regarded as a thing rather to be ashamed than to be proud of. It is no longer flaunted openly. The anti-nautch movement has secured a firm foothold among a large section of the community, and is spreading every day.

Educated officials, it has been repeatedly acknowledged, are as a class noted for freedom from corruption.

Although there has always been plenty of affection in Indian homes, the recognition that women and children have personalities to be respected and are not mere extensions of the personality of the head of the family, is a modern feature.

Women are growing to feel that they have rights, and they no longer acquiesce in things to which they submitted quietly some years ago, such as, (a small instance) eating out of the husband's plate after he had finished. The practice of women dining after the men is rapidly on the wane in educated circles.

To revivalist movements, such as Swami Vivekanadan's, and to

the Theosophical Society's activities we owe the strong reaction against the drinking habits common among the first generation of English-educated Indians. The younger generation is almost entirely total abstaining, and habitual drinkers are to be found only among men who have passed middle age.

The growth of public spirit, easily distinguishable from the caste spirit, is perhaps the most valuable feature of modern India.

Social reform of an organized character and affecting institutions, is due chiefly to the work of the Brahmo Samaj and of the Parthana Samaj, to the National Social Conference, and to Social Reform Associations connected therewith. The results here are not very impressive from a statistical point of view; but as mentioned at the outset, the thing to be regarded is the amount and vigor of opposition, which is distinctly less now than formerly.

Among definite reforms we may allude to:

1. The disappearance of polygamy.
2. Remarriages of young widows, and more particularly the increasing extent to which families high up in the social scale are adopting the reform, especially among Maharashtra Brahmans.
3. Growing number of widows' homes, and improvements in the treatment of widows. In towns it is common nowadays to see widows in good families wearing their hair and even a few jewels. They are not shunned to the same extent as formerly.
4. Slow rise in the age of marriage, due as much to economic causes as to social reform propaganda.
5. Less prejudice to female education, and an increasing desire to send girls to schools and to pay fees for their education.
6. Recognition of the importance of the depressed classes, and an earnest desire to raise them in the social scale.
7. Larger number of people traveling to foreign countries, and diminished difficulties to admission.
8. The favorable reception given by a very large section of the Hindu press and public to a bill like Mr. Basu's, evincing an increased repugnance to caste barriers.

There is, of course, still a large mass of immovable conservatism; but these are noteworthy signs to the eye of insight.

If we could conceive social life as a forest of trees, we would see the old institutions decaying and withered, while the new reforms appear as young shoots oozing life at every pore.

The change of viceroys, some six months ago, has been a help in the furtherance of political rest. The last viceroy, Lord Minto, was definitely a man of peace and was anxious, so far as possible, to satisfy all the people. But the anarchic methods of the disloyal few necessitated the vigorous repressive methods with which his name was connected. The present viceroy, Lord Hardinge, is a man of more force of character and is also pacific and constructive in his official life. He is showing marked sympathy with the people, and yet

reveals a firmness in adhering to the absolute necessity of British supremacy. He is the first viceroy to be willing to receive a deputation sent to him by the National Congress. And the reception was cordial; but he gave them to understand that, under present conditions, the congress was no longer a necessity. His contention is a very reasonable one, namely that, inasmuch as government has enlarged the opportunities of the people through increasing extensively their representation in the legislative bodies, those bodies not the congress will furnish to them at present the opportunity for agitating and discussing public affairs. Many Indian gentlemen feel the force of this contention; and it seems likely to be a serious blow to the prestige of the congress, even if it will not destroy it entirely.

One of the laws recently enacted was directed at the seditious press of the land. This is really a modification and a mollification of the temporary act recently framed with a view to meeting the disloyalty of press and platform. This act has none of the asperity of the temporary one. All feel that the recent violence of the vernacular press, its racial antagonism and political bitterness, must be held in check if the unrest is to cease and if the present government is to have an opportunity to render its best service to the people.

The king-emperor of India did very wisely in proclaiming his purpose to come, with the queen, to India in December next to hold a great Durbar in Delhi to which all the nobility and official dignitaries of the land are invited, and where the king will essentially repeat the coronation exercises and be installed by this people of the Orient as their own emperor and will receive from them their united loyal assent and homage. It will be a great pageant, splendid in its oriental coloring and long to be remembered for its magnificent display. It will probably far exceed in picturesqueness the coronation exercises in Great Britain. The occasion will be unique in that it will be the first time that a king and queen of Great Britain will have appeared in this land in that capacity. It will also be the first opportunity that the people of this land will have had to proclaim a western king as their own emperor.